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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on changes sought in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne (Australia) as a way to encourage greater involvement with online technologies. Specifically, the paper looks at staff development as a central component to changes, maps out where the faculty has gone, and takes a brief look at where it is headed. An integrated framework for staff development is presented that includes a united approach, staff development teams, departmental point of contact, focused workshops, ongoing seminars, and the Arts IT&MM (Information Technologies & Multimedia) Fair. Persistent problems and challenges are summarized, including lapses in communication between providers, scheduling of workshops, incentives, and staying on track and motivated. (Contains 21 references.) (MES)

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DEVELOPING STAFF IT SKILLS IN THE ARTS

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Abstract

In the Arts, we've been a bit slower than some Faculties in coming to terms with the increasing use of IT&MM in teaching. In this paper, we reflect upon changes we've sought as a way to encourage greater involvement with online technologies. Specifically, we look at staff development as a central component to changes and map out where we've gone and take a brief look at where we are headed.

Keywords

staff development, professional training, university policies

Introduction

Despite the emphasis in Australian higher education on online teaching and learning, many academic staff still struggle to understand and use digital technologies. For a significant section of the university, information technologies and multimedia (IT&MM) are seen to be complex, untried and pedagogically unsound (Salter & Hansen, 1999). Non-participation in online teaching, however, has serious consequences through the loss of valuable experience and expertise in matters regarding IT (Bennett, Priest & McPherson, 1999). Truly critical discussions regarding the influence of IT&MM throughout university communities need a wide participation of informed academic staff members.

In the Faculty of Arts at my university, a concern was raised that only a 'digital elite' were benefiting from a move towards integrated online teaching. Relatively few were obtaining funding for innovative projects and, increasingly, these few were distancing themselves from colleagues who had not yet begun to explore new modes of instructional delivery. Similar to Gunn, Lefoe, Graham, Left, and Smith (1999), we began to worry about our own 'digital divide' between those mastering the new technologies and the staff who had a limited understanding of the use of technology in teaching. An informal survey of the use of IT showed us that it largely consisted of motivated individuals working in isolation.

In response, the Faculty set out to encourage and fund *staff development* initiatives. In this paper, I trace how we identified key issues in staff IT training and put together a framework for integrated staff training. My paper concludes with reflection upon some of the persistent issues still facing the Arts.

Identification and Clarification of Key Issues

As Ellis, O'Reilley and Debreceny (1998) report, we found relatively few reports on academic staff development for teaching and learning online and/or technology training in the Australasian context. Before developing our own program, we used their study as a framework and set out to identify key themes in the area of staff development. Although we recognise that we run the risk of building upon a narrow foundation, we made the decision to constrain the variables which might influence the provision of staff training (e.g. the cultural context, workplace agreements, or funded staff development programs) by focusing primarily on papers presented at ASCILITE conferences from 1995-2000.

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As we read, we brainstormed and rejected potential themes. Eventually, we came up with a tentative set of categories and then had colleagues check to see if our analysis had a degree of 'resonance' with their own experiences. After more debate, we arrived at five categories we thought might underpin the foundations of a staff development program (Table 1).

Central theme	Key points	References
Anxiety regarding the use of online technologies	Embarrassment of being perceived as technologically illiterate	Gunn et al (1999); Koppi, Chaloupka, Llewellyn, Cheney, Clark and Fenton-Kerr (1998) McNaught (1995); Salter & Hansen (1999)
Sceptical of online learning	Pre-disposition to certain styles of teaching Technology degrades rich face-to-face interactions IT 'privileged' for its own sake Gap between innovators and primary practitioners	Bennett et al (1999); Jones, Stewart and Power (1999); Hewson and Hughes (1998)
Lack of clear university policies	'Soft', intermittent funding Little recognition or time allowance for online teaching; few career incentives Tenure related to research, not innovative teaching practices	Gunn et al (1999); Jones et al (1999); Leigh (2000); Marriott (1997); McNaught (1995); Porter and Corderoy (1998) Rossiter (1997); Salter and Hansen (1999)
Absence of IT assistance; working in relative isolation	Academics not interested in mastering technologies, but how to use them Require ongoing team-based support to work with seemingly complex systems and applications	Corderoy and Lefoe (1997); Porter and Corderoy (1998); Salter and Hansen (1999)
Problems in developing online materials	Quality may not be of a global standard Unexpected copyright, access and format issues Under-estimated development times	Bennett et al (1999); Jones et al (1999); Pilgrim and Creek (1997); Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (1999)

Table 1: Selected staff development issues in ASCILITE conference papers (1995-2000)

The themes we drew from the literature certainly resonated with our experiences in the Arts Faculty. Regarding anxiety, it was clear from our discussions with colleagues that Arts staff often distanced themselves from technology. On occasion, being a 'Luddite' was worn as an honorary badge. It was a point of resistance against a perceived effort that IT practices sought increasingly to homogenize the curriculum.

In a Faculty that prides itself with small class sizes, a 'human touch' and heavy involvement with face-to-face teaching, the spread of IT technologies was met with a degree of scepticism. Few of us could even think of ways to make our reliance on the printed text come alive in ways that we had seen in Medicine or Science that brilliantly worked through complex processes in all kinds of visual ways. Increasingly, too, an undercurrent developed amongst staff who came to view IT as a 'privileged' way of teaching. No matter how good you were, it was felt, you would not be recognised without the integration of online materials into your subject.

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As Ellis and Phelps (1999) recognise, for example, we also felt that academics require more than the development of technological skills. Online development necessitates new pedagogical approaches, challenging previous practices with regards assessment, group interaction and student/teacher dialogue. The progression towards on-line teaching and learning often necessitates collaborative teamwork in relation to course design, development and delivery. It was going to take a shift in culture across the Faculty to really make a difference.

Working in isolation is a constant bane of an Arts academic. More than professionally-oriented programs such as business studies, we do not necessarily share a 'common goal' or even generally recognised 'industry standards'. Although Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (1999) found that a collaborative model of staff development promoted a feeling of "mutual support that staff gained, knowing that others were facing, and together solving, the challenges of this new teaching environment" (p. 57), Arts staff are accustomed to working alone and getting sole recognition for their work.

Perhaps tied to each and every one of the issues we found was simply the fact that the development of decent IT materials takes time. For those who had gotten funding, we watched in dismay as they came to grips with complex technical and pedagogical issues when they attempted to put materials online.

Towards a Faculty of Arts Staff Development Plan

Near the end of 1999, an internal survey of academic staff showed that 52% were interested in developing their skills in the use of IT&MM. Based on this interest, the Faculty decided to provide 30% of its IT funding towards staff development projects to meet four central goals:

- To create a culture of learning with technology in the Faculty;
- To create an atmosphere of collaboration and sharing of innovative practices;
- To create a climate of reflection on teaching practice;
- To raise to 50% the number of academic staff "trained" in IT&MM.

For definition, we decided that those who completed funded projects, or participated in at least eight hours of workshops would be considered "trained".

Nine of the Arts projects funded in the academic year 2000 included a specific staff development component. The response was enthusiastic, and attendance records indicated that 140 staff participated in a development activity. To evaluate the efficacy, the Faculty Associate Dean, IT in the Faculty commissioned an external evaluation of the program. Two evaluators from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education completed the study in February, 2001 (MacKinnon & Hartley, 2001).

MacKinnon and Hartley (2001) conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 of the 9 grant holders and e-mailed a short questionnaire to 46 of the workshop participants. Twelve (26%) of the participants responded. Overall, the evaluators found that the staff development program was received very well and found that a "profound and enduring shift has taken place within the Faculty of Arts with regard to the acceptance of technology and teaching" (p. 1). Despite this clear success, the researchers also discovered three key concerns that staff raised about the program.

First, MacKinnon and Hartley (2001) found that staff questioned why the provision of workshops was based on 'soft', rather than ongoing, sources of funding. They argued that it would be more appropriate to have such programs on a regular basis. Related to this, staff also reported a preference for departmental-based sessions over cross-faculty workshops. Within departments, the academics thought they could better build opportunities for collaboration and collegial assistance.

A second concern regarded the threshold of staff training. How many skills was an average academic expected to gain in regards to IT&MM? Already pressed for time, they preferred more

technical support and expertise be made available so as to free them up for the use, and not the production, of online teaching materials.

Finally, staff noted a gap between learning about IT&MM and actually using it effectively in their teaching. That is, they wanted to de-emphasise technology for its own sake and gain more of a focus on teaching with IT&MM resources. Staff also asked that training take place during non-instructional periods, include an individual tutorial component and form part of a wider conversation across the Faculty about sharing ideas and experiences.

Moving in New Directions

The current dispersed approach to academic professional development has in many instances resulted in blurred boundaries and a sometimes unnatural divorcing of theory from skills. We started discussion by making a list of contrasting ideas (Table 2).

Individual training sessions	Collaborative training sessions
University-based	Faculty / departmental based
Dispersed training staff	Integrated, one-stop services
Lack of recognition	Career incentives
Modular	Integrated
Skills and technical focus	Theory and pedagogical focus
Grass roots	Policy driven
Institutional-based	Needs based
Deficit model (don't have)	Additive model (will enhance)
Occasional sessions	Intensive programs
IT privileged	Best practice privileged
University conference on IT	Innovations in teaching and learning
Staff only	Student involvement

Table 2: Blurred boundaries and possible directions in staff training

This set of 'simple binaries' served as a useful way to initiate discussions with staff trainers both within and outside the Faculty. Rather than present a list of (sometimes) competing ideas and services, the table provided us with a way to begin thinking about how to move forward. That is, the table acted as a catalyst for discussion in a context where there are relatively few defined boundaries.

An Integrated Framework for Staff Development

The Faculty responded to the external evaluation and the demand for staff development activities by once again highlighting the need for staff development in IT&MM project funding, re-focusing goals in this area and appointing a lecturer to co-ordinate staff development activities.

In light of the report, we argued for a holistic approach to academic staff development. Such a program would attempt to bring together providers across the University in an effort to provide academics with clear and structured pathways to professional development.

A United Approach

The staff development coordinator drew together workshop ideas, personnel and funding from a variety of sources: the Arts IT&MM Committee, the Faculty of Arts technical support unit (ArtsIT), the Centre for Communication Skills and ESL, the Disability Liaison Unit, the Horwood Language Centre and the Department of Teaching and Learning Resources, Information Division. We set out to develop a single 'shop front' that would bring together information relating to all the providers and their contacts in regards to current events, documentation, templates and support material.

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When we built a website to advertise ourselves, we included an online registration facility for all workshops. Relevant providers were listed in a central database and academics seeking assistance were directed to the most appropriate provider(s). In consultation with providers, we update the site on a regular basis and encourage it to be linked from Faculty and departmental web pages.

Staff Development Teams

We decided to create staff development teams to provide Departments with consulting. In this instance, we borrowed ideas that Radloff (Online) suggested for helping implement staff development. Team members, Radloff urged, should liase directly at the departmental level. The role is that of a *case manager,* who facilitates, coordinates and organises professional development specific to departmental and individuals teaching and research needs.

In collaboration with specific Departments, our team members complement and extend existing programs. In a sense, we help to translate identified gaps into programs that integrate theory and skills. After this stage, we then try to bring together resources from providers across the campus to create tailored and flexible programs. Where one-to-one training is needed, consultants do this themselves or contact other team members appropriate to the task.

As programs are completed, the consultant continues to maintain an ongoing role with departments and individuals. The team member assists with evaluating programs, working with individuals, identifying further needs and encouraging participation in programs.

Departmental Point of Contact

At present, members of training units have a difficult time promoting their services simply because there is no identified 'point of contact' at the departmental level. To facilitate professional development, we utilise contacts within the IT&MM Committee to act as liaisons between a training consultant and the representative Department. Essentially, they work with the consultant to conduct a needs evaluation and develop a strategic approach to professional development. After the development of guidelines to define roles and directions, a Faculty-based orientation for all contacts could be run as a point of departure.

Relevant, Focused Workshops

With the team in place, we sat down and brainstormed what academic staff had best responded to previous offering we had each made as individual trainers. We departed from what we had in place, and then tailored our own work to what could be accomplished within a two-hour sessions. Some of our thinking had to be re-directed away from what we had learned during our experiences as undergraduate instructors; at other times, we had to think beyond our own embedded work practices to get back to basics. Eventually, we came up with a menu of 14 different modules that ranged from introducing the use of web-based University services to designing for disabilities through to discussion on teaching with the online class management facility. One-to-one tutorial sessions were offered and regularly scheduled throughout the two-week program.

Ongoing Seminars

During the semester teaching period, we switch our emphasis on staff development away from technical skill building to discussions regarding pedagogical issues. As Salter and Hansen (1999) remind us, of course, there's no unified set of skills and strategies required for on-line teaching and so we look at 'case studies' of using IT in different contexts. We have both internal and external guest speakers. In conjunction with this series, we continue to work with academics on a one-to-one basis throughout the semester.

The Arts IT&MM Fair

For the last two years, and then this one, the Associate Dean, IT has organised a half-day 'fair' during the non-teaching period to showcase IT&MM projects throughout the Faculty. The atmosphere is light-hearted and collegial; last year, for example, bottles of champagne were given as door prizes and two poets helped open the proceedings. Over the course of a morning, attendees are invited to walk around and visit presenting academics in one of three balloon-filled computer labs. The

emphasis in these fairs is on informal conversations, the sharing of practical advice and, to be honest, a way to show each other simply what we've all been doing. The value in such activities lies in breaking down barriers between the somewhat more formal University-wide internal conferences in online teaching and visits to individual classrooms and offices. In the future, we plan to encourage students to present their thoughts and work about online learning alongside ours at the fair.

Persistent Problems and Challenges

One central theme of this conference is reflection. Speaking for ourselves, we would be naïve to think that we couldn't do better in terms of inter-team coordination, workshop scheduling, offering incentives for staff and our own motivation.

Lapses in Communication between Providers

Despite our best efforts and mutual goodwill, our somewhat loose coalition of training partners falls apart on occasion. We simply do not see each other that often, nor do we share a clearly defined agenda for staff training. What is originally scheduled to be a planning session for workshop may turn into a heated discussion about pedagogical approaches, for example, or tensions may develop amongst team members in regards to the sharing of materials. To address these issues, we're trying to make time to get to know each other through relaxed lunches as well as better define our own roles in the larger group. We find that fractured and busy schedules defeat our efforts to meet more often. Perhaps we could make better use of IT resources such as bulletin boards, group websites and online discussion lists to foster better communication amongst ourselves?

Scheduling of Workshops

When is the best time to train academic staff? During the semester, most are so focused on their present teaching load that they simply can't spare an afternoon to consider other modes of delivery. In non-teaching periods, staff are hesitant to devote precious research time to attend workshop sessions. What we've done so far is to schedule longer sessions during the non-instructional periods, maximise the flexibility of our offerings through multiple presentations and maintain a bi-weekly staff training afternoon during the semesters. Nonetheless, it seems, we never seem to get it right – and sections of the Faculty inevitably miss out.

Incentives

Increasingly, we are moving towards offering financial incentives for staff to attend training sessions. There's been debate amongst us whether paying salaried staff is the best way to spend our limited IT&MM funds, but it seems that some recognition of their efforts is needed to bolster workshop attendance. Especially as we move beyond the enthusiasm for IT that was evident in groups of early adopters, it is a challenge to encourage already busy staff to further develop their skill set. If funding attendance doesn't work, we may be at a loss for ideas: as a general rule, we are hesitant to move towards any punitive or coercive 'incentives' for training.

Staying on Track and Staying Motivated

To be frank, our motivation has been derailed recently by our somewhat belated understanding of accessibility (Nevile,' 1999) and legal issues (Lean, 1999). The challenges of meeting digital copyright and accessibility laws in addition to both Faculty and University web publishing guidelines is seemingly overwhelming. By the time those of us in charge of leading staff training understand the many aspects of putting up a fully compliant teaching web site, for example, the terrain seems to shift. That movement, of course, frustrates our efforts to act as 'friendly translators' to other staff members who are just coming to terms with online teaching. In regards to digital copyright laws, for example, the realisation by some staff that individuals are now personally liable for infringement has cooled their drive to learn to post materials. To meet accessibility regulations, we have first had to ask external consultants to train a small group of web designers, and then determine how to make that information and training available to a wider group of staff members. Such efforts have left our team dispirited at times.

Conclusion

We've made a start, and have begun to address some of the key issues in staff development that are facing Australian tertiary educators across the board. To be honest, it's been difficult to stay on track with the five areas we identified: the anxieties, the scepticism, unclear policies, working in isolation or difficulties in creating online materials. What we thought would become a strong framework for a training program has essentially been turned into our own set of briefing notes.

We regard our key success so far to be the promotion of a supportive culture for IT teaching and learning within the Faculty. At the end of this academic year, we will again commission two more external reviews to see how we've done. One review team will evaluate of our current staff development program; the second report will try to determine if the students themselves see any of the results of our efforts.

Of course, we recognise that staff development must eventually be held in accredited training courses to reflect a growing need for formal recognition (Ellis et al, 1998). We need to investigate staff training in more depth and follow up on the work, for example, of O'Reilly, Ellis and Newton (2000). Further, it is no secret that we ourselves are still working out how to be trainers, and how to integrate the traditional academic career with those of an emerging hybrid breed of academics who are colleagues, trainers and recognised researchers in their own right.

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